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Zeroing in on the Culminating Point

by


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The contents of this paper reflect my own personal views and are not necessarily endorsed by the Naval War College or the Department of the Navy.

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## Abstract

### ZEROING IN ON THE CULMINATING POINT

The culminating point is an important concept that must be understood by 21<sup>st</sup> Century operational level commanders and planners. It is of the utmost importance that one's own, and the enemy's culminating point be identified with the highest possible degree of accuracy during the planning phase of a major operation or campaign. Failing to do so could result in a premature halt of the attack, thus benefiting the defender, or lead to the overextension of one's own force, leaving it vulnerable to an enemy counterattack.

This study begins with a theoretical discussion of the culminating point, for both the attack and defense. Key definitions and related concepts provided in Carl von Clausewitz's *On War*, Joint Publication 3-0, *Doctrine for Joint Operations*, and U.S. Army Field Manual 100-5, *Operations*, are discussed in detail. These sources provide many of the factors that can cause a force to reach culmination, and serve as a basis for understanding the difficulties involved in trying to determine the time and place of culmination.

The historical example of the Battle of Chancellorsville is used to illustrate the importance of the culminating point concept. Other current factors attributing to culmination are discussed, and recommendations are offered to help operational commanders and planners to "zero in" on this elusive point.

## **Introduction**

The culminating point is an important concept that must be understood by 21<sup>st</sup> Century operational level commanders and planners. It is of the utmost importance that one's own, and the enemy's culminating point be identified with the highest possible degree of accuracy during the planning phase of a major operation or campaign. Failing to do so could result in a premature halt of the attack, thus benefiting the defender, or lead to the overextension of one's own force, leaving it vulnerable to an enemy counterattack.

To prove this thesis, I will first conduct an in-depth review of the theoretical definitions of the culminating point, found in *On War* and current doctrinal manuals. After an understanding of the theoretical concept is established, an analysis of the Chancellorsville case study, as it pertains to the culminating point concept, will serve as a historical example that supports the thesis. Following the case study analysis, I will present several current factors derived from my research that could negatively influence a commander's determination of his culminating point. I will then offer recommendations and give my conclusion.

## **Theoretical Discussion of the Culminating Point**

Clausewitz substantiates the difficulty of determining the culminating point prior to its occurring, by stating that doing so is, "often ... entirely a matter of the imagination."<sup>1</sup> He suggests that a plethora of variables exist, all working simultaneously, that will make the task of isolating the actual time and place of culmination virtually impossible. Clausewitz states:

This is why the great majority of generals will prefer to stop well short of their objectives rather than risk approaching it too closely and why those with high courage and an enterprising spirit will often overshoot it and fail to attain their purpose. Only the man who can achieve great results with limited means has really hit the mark.<sup>2</sup>

Is what Clausewitz says true? Can the culminating point only be determined by a commander's "best guess?" If so, might this cause problems during future operations? What, if anything, can be done to ensure that a commander has the tools required for making a well-informed decision as to the location of his culminating point, versus arriving at a conclusion based on his "imagination?" For these and other reasons, a thorough study of this concept is warranted.

Obviously, before one can determine the reasons that cause commanders at the operational level of war to stop short of, or exceed their culminating point, it is first necessary to achieve a thorough understanding of what, exactly, a culminating point is and what causes it to occur. Carl von Clausewitz's book, *On War*, provides a theoretical definition of the culminating point, both for the attacker and the defender, and also provides some valuable insights that will help build a foundation for understanding this very important concept. Coupled with Clausewitz's theory, doctrinal definitions of the culminating point provided in Joint Publication 3-0, *Doctrine for Joint Operations*, and the U.S. Army's Field Manual 100-5, *Operations*, are of paramount importance, for doctrine arms future commanders and planners with an outline of how they should plan for and fight future wars.

Clausewitz defines the culminating point of the attacker as, "the point where their (attacker's) remaining strength is just enough to maintain a defense and wait for peace. Beyond that point the scale turns and the reaction follows with a force that is usually much stronger than that of the original attack."<sup>3</sup> This definition implies that from the moment it starts moving forward, the attacking force loses strength. Clausewitz cites five causes:

1. The attacker has to besiege, assault or observe enemy fortresses.
2. Resistance increases as the attacker enters hostile territory.
3. The attacker is moving farther away from his sources of supply.
4. Allies will come to the aid of the defender.

5. The defender, being in real danger, makes the greater effort.<sup>4</sup>

As the attacker weakens, the defender is growing stronger while trading space for time. The defender's lines of communication are shortening as it moves closer to its base of operations, thus allowing the defender to more rapidly rearm and resupply. Put simply, the attacker is forced to expend more energy in taking ground than the defender does in holding or giving ground.

As a logical follow-on to his culminating point of attack definition, Clausewitz explains that the goal of offensive operations "is the turning point at which the attack becomes defense. If one were to go beyond that point, it would not only be a useless effort which could not add to success. It would in fact be a damaging one."<sup>5</sup> In this passage, Clausewitz is specifically addressing the potential hazards facing an attacker that exceeds his culminating point. Crossing the point would so weaken the attacking force that it would no longer be able to defend itself against an enemy counterattack.

In Joint Publication 3-0, the definition of the culminating point of attack is derived from Clausewitz's writings and therefore bears a striking similarity. The Publication states:

The culminating point is the point in time and space at which an attacker's combat power no longer exceeds that of the defender. Here the attacker greatly risks counterattack and defeat and continues the attack only at great peril. Success in the attack at all levels is to secure the objective before reaching culmination.<sup>6</sup>

This contemporary definition does not specifically mention that the attacker should assume a defensive posture, although one could argue that it is implied. The Joint definition also stresses the importance of securing the objective, inferring that the attacker's culminating point is somewhere beyond the objective. Joint Publication 3-0 does not provide a list of reasons that may cause the attacker's strength to continuously weaken prior to the

culminating point, but it does describe how synchronization of logistics can forestall the attacker's culmination.

The definition of the offensive culminating point given in FM 100-5 mirrors that of Joint Publication 3-0. The Army doctrine however, provides a list of possible causes for offensive culmination at the strategic and operational levels:

The forward movement of supplies may be poorly organized, lack needed transport, or available stocks may be exhausted. The need to protect LOCs from partisans or regular forces operating on the flanks may sap the quantitative advantage of forward forces. The attacking force may suffer sufficient losses to tip the balance of forces. The soldiers of the attacking force may become physically exhausted and less morally committed to the attack as it progresses.<sup>7</sup>

Shifting to the culminating point of defense, Clausewitz believed that a force is compelled to defend because it lacks the sufficient strength needed to launch an offensive. This weakness could be attributed to the defender's lack of superiority in numbers of troops and weapon systems, his lack of training in conducting an attack, his inability to sustain a logistical effort over long distances, etc. Thus, the weaker force must assume the defense until his strength is more evenly matched with the attacker's. It is at this point where Clausewitz stresses the need for the defender to take offensive actions, for acting in a purely defensive manner yields no positive gains:

The defense... should be used only so long as weakness compels, and be abandoned as soon as we are strong enough to pursue a positive object. When one has used defensive measures successfully, a more favorable balance of strength is usually created.<sup>8</sup>

Clausewitz believed that once this balance is achieved, the lack of an offensive reaction, or counterattack, from the defender would be contradictory to the nature of war. Hence, as the attacker approaches culmination, "A sudden powerful transition to the offensive – the flashing sword of vengeance – is the greatest moment for the defense."<sup>9</sup> Here Clausewitz provides the rationale behind his definition of the culminating point of defense:

The general losses to which the defender has continually exposed himself are finally catching up with him, the point of culmination will necessarily be reached when the defender must make up his mind and act, when the advantages of waiting have been completely exhausted.<sup>10</sup>

It is important for one to understand that culmination is not a unilateral event. Rather, it is an interactive process that occurs simultaneously in both the attacker and defender.<sup>11</sup> As the attacker loses combat power through attrition of forces, etc., the defender is also suffering losses, but at a lesser rate, causing his strength to increase relative to the attacker's. When the culminating point is reached by the attacker, it is also reached by the defender, creating a balance that affords the latter the best opportunity for a successful counterattack. Waiting will no longer benefit the defender, for his forces may continue to weaken while the attacker potentially grows stronger through the arrival of fresh troops and supplies. Thus, the defender will exceed his culminating point if he fails to act.

According to Joint Publication 3-0, the culminating point of the defense occurs when the defender can no longer conduct a successful defense nor is he able to counterattack.<sup>12</sup> FM 100-5 gives the same definition, and both sources add that, "The art of the defense is to draw the attacker to his culminating point, then strike when he... is ill-disposed to defend successfully."<sup>13</sup> Once again, the doctrinal definitions are similar to Clausewitz's. However, as Major Stephen Duncan points out, Clausewitz's definition suggests that the defender at the point of culmination is not *incapable* of offensive action, but rather is forced by circumstances to attack."<sup>14</sup>

### **Case Study: Chancellorsville**

On January 25, 1863 shortly after the Union's devastating loss at Fredericksburg, Lincoln appointed Major General Joseph Hooker as the Commander of the Army of the Potomac.<sup>15</sup> Hooker graduated from West Point in 1837, and soon after headed west as a



newly brevetted captain to serve with Captain Robert E. Lee and Lieutenant Thomas J. Jackson. Before the Mexican War ended, all three would win promotions for gallantry in the field, and have an early opportunity to assess each other's talents while engaged in combat.<sup>16</sup> During the early years of the Civil War, Hooker proved to be an excellent commander at the division and corps levels. His heroics during the battles at Williamsburg, Fair Oaks, Second Bull Run, Antietam, and Fredericksburg earned "Fighting Joe" his nickname. Hooker knew from past battles that the Union Army rarely had an accurate intelligence picture of their enemy. To correct this shortcoming, he consolidated his cavalry into a single corps, enlisted the services of Professor Thaddeus Lowe and his observation balloons,<sup>17</sup> and organized a Bureau of Military Information, which provided a network of agents supplying information from behind enemy lines. These intelligence assets made Hooker the "best informed Union general who had ever taken the field."<sup>18</sup>

Prior to the start of the battle, Lee's available forces consisted of Stonewall Jackson's corps and two divisions from Longstreet's corps. Confederate infantry totaled 60,892, compared to Hooker's force of seven infantry corps comprised of 133,868 troops. He outnumbered Lee in cavalry 11,500 to 4,450, and also enjoyed a nearly two to one advantage in artillery, with 413 guns to Lee's 220.<sup>19</sup>

Hooker developed a very complex and brilliant plan for defeating Lee's Army of Northern Virginia. He would send the Army of the Potomac's entire cavalry corps minus one brigade south to take up a position just north of Richmond. Once there, they would sever the railroad lines that supplied Lee's army in Fredericksburg, and establish a blocking position denying Lee's possible retreat to the south. Simultaneous with the cavalry's move, Hooker would send Howard's Eleventh Corps, Slocum's Twelfth, and Meade's Fifth far to

the west, crossing at Kelly's Ford. The three corps were to quickly cross the Rappahannock and Rapidan, then close from the west on Chancellorsville.<sup>20</sup> Couch would then take two divisions from his Second Corps to secure Banks' and United States Fords, ensuring that his movement was observed by the Confederates at Fredericksburg. Hooker's left wing consisted of Sedgwick's Sixth and Reynolds's First Corps, both situated at Fredericksburg. Hooker assumed that Lee would be fixated on the 40,000 troops directly opposing him, and the forces moving to his near left, thus allowing the three Union corps to slip into his (Lee's) rear undetected. Finally, Hooker would stage Sickles's Third Corps in a central location, ready to move in support of either wing.<sup>21</sup> Hooker was extremely confident in his plan and was said to have proudly boasted, "May God have mercy on General Lee, for I will have none."<sup>22</sup> From 27-30 April, Hooker's forces moved to their positions according to plan. (See Map A) By early afternoon on the 30<sup>th</sup> of April, all three corps had closed on Chancellorsville virtually undetected. By that evening, Hooker's right wing forces numbered 54,000, with 40,000 on the left wing and another 30,000 in reserve.<sup>23</sup>

Lee was surprised that Hooker was able to move such a large force without his (Lee's) knowing it. On the evening of the 29<sup>th</sup>, Lee was still unsure of where the main attack was to come. There was a sizable force (Sedgwick's left wing) already crossing at Fredericksburg, and there was word from Stuart that a large Union force of roughly 14,000 was crossing the Rapidan towards Lee's flank and rear. With that, Lee ordered three brigades to move west and establish blocking positions at the Chancellorsville crossroads, and by doing so violated doctrine by splitting his force while opposed by a superior enemy.<sup>24</sup>

One could argue that, as the defender, Lee was forced to act or risk culmination. The counter-argument ties directly to Clausewitz's theory that the culminating point cannot be

reached by the defender unless it is simultaneously reached by the attacker. Hooker had not reached his culminating point, so in theory neither had Lee.

By late afternoon on 30 April, the right and left wings of Hooker's Army were in position according to plan. The right wing at Chancellorsville would act as a hammer, crushing Lee's Army against the anvil, Hooker's left wing at Fredericksburg. Meade greeted Slocum at the Chancellorsville House and in his jubilation proclaimed, "This is splendid Slocum! Hurrah for old Joe! We're on Lee's flank, and he doesn't know it."<sup>25</sup> It would be an understatement to say that Meade was shocked when Slocum presented orders signed by Hooker that read:

The General directs that no advance be made from Chancellorsville until the columns (II, III, V, XI, and XII Corps) are concentrated. He expects to be at Chancellorsville tonight.<sup>26</sup>

Hooker waited until 1100 on 1 May, nearly 20 hours after the right wing forces moved into Chancellorsville, to issue movement orders to his corps commanders. What caused Hooker to hesitate? Did he sense that his culminating point was near? An attack launched on 30 April would surely have destroyed Lee's smaller army, or at least forced its withdraw south where Union cavalry was waiting. Conflicting intelligence reports supposedly caused Hooker's delay. First, Professor Lowe reported heavy troop movement to the rear of the Confederate positions at Fredericksburg, but was unable to ascertain the size of the units moving due to an early morning fog. Second, captured Confederate soldiers falsely reported that Longstreet's two detached divisions were expected to close on Fredericksburg that day. Third, his exterior lines of communications, especially the telegraph system he relied upon so heavily, had many faults and messages were being received hours after they were sent. Last, Hooker's information bureau sent accurate reports

that Longstreet was still at Suffolk, and that 59,000 rations had just been issued to Lee's Army.<sup>27</sup> Finally, after a 20-hour delay and at the constant persistence of his commanders, Hooker issued orders for three corps to move east.<sup>28</sup> Unfortunately for Hooker, Lee took advantage of the delay by repositioning the majority of his forces just east of Chancellorsville, proving that time is to the defender's advantage.

At 1230, the Union lead elements came in contact with Confederate forces, led by Stonewall Jackson's Corp, just east of Chancellorsville. By 1330, elements of Meade's and Slocum's forces had broken out of the Wilderness and had achieved positions on higher ground with good fields of fire, when Hooker inexplicably called a halt to their advance and ordered all of his corps back to their positions at Chancellorsville.<sup>29</sup> Hooker's order left his corps commanders in a state of disbelief. Upon returning to Hooker's headquarters, Couch personally informed the Commanding General that the high ground with open fields of fire that he (Couch) had held just a few hours ago was now in the possession of the Confederates. Hooker replied, "It's alright Couch. I have got Lee just where I want him; he must fight me on my own ground."<sup>30</sup> Couch wrote of Hooker's explanation, "To hear from his own lips that the advantages gained by the successful marches of his lieutenants were to culminate in fighting a defensive battle in that nest of thickets was too much, and I retired from his presence with the belief that my commanding general was a whipped man."<sup>31</sup> That evening, Hooker sent word to Reynolds ordering him to bring his corps to Chancellorsville.

Why had Hooker perceived that he had reached his culminating point of attack at Chancellorsville? He developed a brilliant plan, and his massive army executed its movements flawlessly. Rather than launching a devastating attack, Hooker decided to jam 80,000 troops into the most inhospitable piece of terrain imaginable, and defend this "ground

of his own choosing.” Had any of the aforementioned causes of culmination occurred? Clausewitz listed lengthening supply lines as a factor. Hooker’s Army was one of the best-equipped forces to ever take the field. His base of supply was located a short distance away at Falmouth, and he took with him enough provisions to last for six days. Wagonloads of resupply were sitting just across the river.<sup>32</sup> One could argue that Clausewitz’s fifth reason might bring Hooker to believe that he had reached his culminating point, for Lee *was* in real danger and he *did* make the greater effort, but only after Hooker allowed him 20 hours to prepare and react. None of the reasons given in FM 100-5 are applicable.

Late 1 May, Stuart informed Lee and Jackson that Howard’s right flank was “in the air.”<sup>33</sup> It was then that Lee and Jackson made plans for the latter’s historic flank march. Jackson proposed to move his entire corps across the face of the enemy, approximately 12 miles, taking up a position to strike the Union’s right and rear. Jackson would have with him 31,700 men and 112 guns, leaving Lee with only 12,900 men and 24 guns opposing Hooker’s powerful force of 80,000 men and 182 guns.<sup>34</sup> In essence, the plan called for Lee to split his Army once again, and if Hooker suddenly got the urge to go on the offensive, risk not only losing his small holding force at Chancellorsville, but also Jackson’s entire Corps. Another variable in the plan was Sedgwick’s forces at Fredericksburg. They could, at any hour realize that the force confronting them was much weaker than earlier believed, thus encouraging the Union’s left wing to quickly attack through the defending Confederates and rapidly close on Lee.

It could be argued that Lee far exceeded his culminating point of attack the moment he went on the offensive. He exposed his forces to almost certain annihilation by splitting them several times in the face of a superior enemy, and by allowing Jackson to march his

entire corps in columns that stretched six miles along the enemy's front. The counter-argument is obvious. Since Hooker failed to act, Lee did not exceed his culminating point of attack.

Jackson's Corps, screened by Stuart's cavalry, made the 12-mile journey through the Wilderness and, by 1700 on 2 May, was configured into three lines of battle stretching across a two-mile front. (See Map B) One hour later, Jackson's attack caught the Union Army completely by surprise. His corps had destroyed practically all of Howard's Corps, and significantly weakened Slocum's and Sickles's Corps. Lee was pressing Hooker's right wing from the east, and in doing so, was supporting Jackson's main attack. Darkness and stiffening Union resistance brought the attack to a halt. Jackson was wounded by his own troops that evening, and replaced by Stuart. Lee wanted to continue the attack immediately and not let the initiative slip away. He recognized the importance of tying the left flank of his element in with the right flank of Stuart. His orders to Stuart were to continue the attack while shifting as much as necessary to achieve link-up.<sup>35</sup> The Confederates resumed the attack at first light and continued to pound Hooker's forces back towards the river. Shortly after the attack began, Lee's and Stuart's forces joined, and although being outnumbered 2 to 1, and taking horrendous losses, they continued to move forward.

Lee continued to attack a force that was much stronger than his own, and in doing so used up twenty-two percent of his infantry. Does this prove that Lee overshot his culminating point? Once again, the answer is no. The culminating point is an interactive process that must occur in both forces simultaneously. Since Hooker, as the defender, was never in danger of reaching his culminating point, Lee could continue his attack until Hooker left the field of battle or until Lee ran out of men.

Hooker's commanders repeatedly asked to launch a counter-offensive, but Hooker refused, stuck in a defensive mindset.<sup>36</sup> Hooker did order his left wing under Sedgwick to attack the forces at Fredericksburg at push west. That afternoon, Sedgwick's 30,000 troops were able to drive Early's force of 10,000 from Fredericksburg. When Lee learned that Hooker's left wing forces were approaching from the east, he split his force yet again, leaving Stuart's 25,000 men to continue their attack on Hooker's 75,000! (See Map C) Lee raced east to join Early. Together their 21,000 soldiers forced Sedgwick's 19,000 Union troops back towards the Rappahannock. Late in the evening on 5 May, with both Union arms being pushed towards the river, Hooker ordered a retreat across the Rappahannock.<sup>37</sup> The Battle of Chancellorsville was over.

In his book *Chancellorsville 1863*, Ernest B. Furgurson suggests that Hooker's decision to stop far short of his culminating point was due to his inability to command at the operational level. "He was in charge of an entire army, with too many corps commanders reporting directly to him... he could not handle the complications, the concepts, of a battle fought beyond his personal vision."<sup>38</sup> Hooker provided his own reason several weeks later to Abner Doubleday by stating, "for once I lost confidence in Hooker, and that is all there is to it."<sup>39</sup> In analyzing this case study, it is readily apparent that the culminating point was never reached at Chancellorsville, due largely to Hooker's failure to identify it.

### **Existing Problems to Overcome**

What are some of the problems that exist today that may cause a commander to stop short of, or exceed the culminating point? First, as discussed in the analysis of Chancellorsville, the leader's experience at the operational level is of great importance. Lee's actions can be justified based on his past experiences while in command of the Army

of Northern Virginia. He had fought with Hooker during the Mexican War and against him in the battles preceding Chancellorsville. Lee knew that Hooker was a very effective commander at the division and corps levels, but would that necessarily make him a good operational commander? Hooker's delay at Chancellorsville, coupled with his subsequent termination of the Union attack on 1 May, told Lee all he needed to know about his adversary.

How is the 21<sup>st</sup> Century operational commander to gain the experience necessary to avoid misjudging his culminating point? In the past, large scale protracted wars afforded the leaders of nations with the opportunity to observe and evaluate the battlefield performance of corps commanders, and select the best of these for operational command. Obviously, this type of setting is rare and hasn't been seen since WWII. Hence, today's operational commanders are selected based on factors unrelated to actual fighting skill. How then, will current and future commanders acquire the skills needed to improve their chances for correctly identifying when and where the culminating point will occur? Simulated war games held at joint and individual service levels are quite possibly the best solution to this problem. Unfortunately, only a handful of the annual war games currently conducted even address the concept of culmination, and none of those researched actually attempt to identify where the culminating point might be.<sup>40</sup>

Another problem exists in the planning arena. Joint Publication 3-0 and FM 100-5 provide a solid doctrinal foundation for understanding the concept. Both documents stress the importance of careful planning, especially in the areas of intelligence and logistics, to ensure that the objective is met prior to culmination. From this doctrinal guidance, one might expect that the planning manuals not only address the culminating point, but also go into



much more specific detail on how to recognize one's own and the enemy's culminating point. A detailed search through the pages of AFSC PUB 1, *The Joint Staff Officer's Guide 1997*, found no mention of the culminating point, and a similar search of the Army's FM 101-5, *Staff Organizations and Operations*, yielded the same results. Finally, a review of OPLAN 1002-90, from which plans for the ground attack during Operation Desert Storm were developed, also made no mention of the culminating point.<sup>41</sup>

A final problem facing 21<sup>st</sup> Century operational commanders is the growing belief shared by many U.S. political leaders and American citizens that "military operations are high-tech and bloodless affairs."<sup>42</sup> The idea that the objective of a military operation is not worth "the loss of one American life" weighs heavily on the mind of a commander. If air power alone will not accomplish the mission, and ground forces must be introduced, how will this "force protection at all costs" mentality affect the commander's judgment? Vincent J. Goulding wrote, "Mid-level commanders serving on the edges of America's empire are now routinely quoted as saying that force protection is their highest priority."<sup>43</sup> Goulding went on to say that "force protection is a commander's inherent responsibility, but is never a *mission*, and accomplishment of the mission is *always* the highest priority."<sup>44</sup> Relying solely on air power and high-tech weapons to achieve mission accomplishment, as seen in Bosnia and Kosovo, could also lead to an erosion of the basic war fighting skills that are critically important to ground forces. Will an operational commander, if forced by circumstances to employ ground troops on some future battlefield, stop far short of his culminating point because he refuses to incur additional casualties?

### Recommendations

For an operational commander to have a working idea of where his own, and the enemy's culminating point will be during a future operation, more must be done in the planning phase. As pointed out earlier, the deliberate planning process does not include calculating where the culminating point will occur. If identifying the precise location of the culminating point is an impossibility prior to battle, can a consideration of all the factors that influence its location yield an approximation, or estimate of the location? During the planning phase of a major operation or campaign, after all of the information is collected and synthesized by the staff, along with the commander's guidance, produces an operations plan or an operations order, is there any guarantee that things will go according to the "plan" once the first shot is fired? The answer to this question is obvious. An "estimate" of where and when the culminating point, or as Major David Benjamin describes it, "culminating zone"<sup>45</sup> will occur can be accomplished in much the same way that logistics and intelligence estimates are. Planners could first develop a working model by considering the "tangible" factors that lead to culmination, provided by Clausewitz, FM 100-5, and other authors including Michael Handel and Milan Vego. The logistics and intelligence estimates already address many of these factors, and should, in their entirety, be included in the culminating point model. The difficulty in developing such a model will come from trying to estimate how the "intangibles" will effect the location of the culminating point. How, for example, can a planner measure the *will* of an enemy, or the likelihood that an ally will come to his aid? How will the "fog and friction of war" be measured? There is no easy solution to this complex problem. It may very well come down to the intellect and experience of the planners, using all available information at their disposal to formulate and assign "weights"

to this large array of unknowns. There is no denying that a large degree of the information fed into the model will be subjective in nature. However, the result of this staff work should provide the commander with a tool that will allow him to make an informed decision, rather than just a guess, as to the time and place of culmination. If the final product of the culminating point model is nothing more than boundary lines on an overlay, that will at least give the commander something to consider, and might be all that is necessary to alleviate the possibility of his pulling a "Hooker" on a future battlefield. I would argue that if a commander has to rely solely on his genius for determining the culminating point as Clausewitz suggests, his chances of missing it will be greater. The follow-on to this recommendation is the need to put the culminating point estimate process in writing. Inclusion of the "how to" process must be made a part of the Joint and Service planning manuals, and the results of the estimate need to be incorporated into operations plans and orders.

Educating future operational commanders and planners on the importance of the culminating point concept is also strongly recommended. War games offer the best opportunity for commanders and their staffs to become proficient in identifying their culminating point. Simulated exercises should include models that allow the commander to visualize where the culminating point, or zone, exists. This undoubtedly will be a very complex and difficult task to accomplish, for many of the same reasons mentioned earlier involving the creation of a culminating point estimate model. Currently, computer simulated war games, terrain model exercises, and actual force on force games at the National Training Center, have no mechanism in place that will calculate, with a fair degree of accuracy, the

location of the culminating point. Consequently, the commander learns that he has gone too far when the controller tells him “your dead.”

In addition to the improved war games recommendation, Service Staff and War Colleges might consider including key historical case studies, that stress the importance of the culminating point concept, to their required reading lists. These institutions should also include lectures and seminars that deal with the potential impact that a “bloodless war” mindset will have on the commander’s ability to correctly judge the culminating point on future battlefields.

### **Conclusion**

The culminating point is an important concept that must be understood by 21<sup>st</sup> Century operational level commanders and planners. It is of the utmost importance that one’s own, and the enemy’s culminating point be identified with the highest possible degree of accuracy during the planning phase of a major operation or campaign. Failing to do so could result in a premature halt of the attack, thus benefiting the defender, or lead to the overextension of one’s own force, leaving it vulnerable to an enemy counterattack.

This study has attempted to show that correctly identifying the culminating point is no easy task, and that failing to do so at the operational level could prove to be disastrous. There are numerous factors, both tangible and intangible, that contribute to the culmination process. Planners must carefully consider all of these factors, to allow the commander to make a well-informed decision on the determination of the culminating point. To accomplish this task, the planning process must include a culminating point estimate, and this estimate should be included in operations plans and orders. Educating the commanders and planners is also crucial to the successful recognition of the culminating point. Simulated war game

should include a model designed to allow the commander to visualize the area or zone where culmination will most likely occur.

## Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, edited and translated by Michael Howard and Peter Paret, (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1976), 528.
- <sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 573.
- <sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 528.
- <sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 566.
- <sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 570.
- <sup>6</sup> Joint Chiefs of Staff, *Doctrine for Joint Operations*, Joint Pub 3-0 (Washington, DC 1 February, 1995), III-22.
- <sup>7</sup> U.S. Army, *Field Manual 100-5, Operations*, (Washington, DC: Department of the Army, 1993), 6-8.
- <sup>8</sup> Clausewitz, 358.
- <sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 370.
- <sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 383.
- <sup>11</sup> Stephen C. Duncan, *Intelligence and Defensive Culminating Point—Piercing the Fog*, (Fort Leavenworth, Kansas: School of Advanced Military Studies, U.S. Army Command and General Staff College, 1994), 7.
- <sup>12</sup> Joint Publication 3-0, III-22.
- <sup>13</sup> Field Manual 100-5, 6-8.
- <sup>14</sup> Duncan, 6.
- <sup>15</sup> Ernest B. Furgurson, *Chancellorsville 1863*, (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1992), 19.
- <sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 22.
- <sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 8.
- <sup>18</sup> Nathan Miller, *Spying for America*, (New York: Paragon House, 1989), 136.
- <sup>19</sup> Furgurson, 88.
- <sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 67.
- <sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>22</sup> James M. McPherson, *Battle Cry of Freedom*, (New York: Ballantine Books, 1989), 639.
- <sup>23</sup> Edward J. Stackpole, *Chancellorsville, Lee's Greatest Battle*, (Harrisburg, Pennsylvania: The Stackpole Company, 1958), 139.
- <sup>24</sup> Furgurson, 104.
- <sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 110.
- <sup>26</sup> Stackpole, 145.
- <sup>27</sup> Furgurson, 136.
- <sup>28</sup> Stackpole, 176.
- <sup>29</sup> Furgurson, 130.
- <sup>30</sup> Ned Bradford, *Battles and Leaders of the Civil War*, (New York: New American Library, 1956), 327.
- <sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>32</sup> Furgurson, 337.
- <sup>33</sup> Stackpole, 206.
- <sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 207.
- <sup>35</sup> Furgurson, 216.
- <sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 242.
- <sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 304.
- <sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 339.
- <sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 140.
- <sup>40</sup> Information received during telephone conversations with Jerome Comello, Professor, Department of Military Strategy, Plans and Operations, U.S. Army War College, and Norman Hitchcock, Colonel USMC, Chief Ground Assessor, U.S. Naval War College, 1 February, 2001.
- <sup>41</sup> Information provided to a member of the JMO faculty, Naval War College, by a representative of Air Component Command, Langley AFB, Virginia, provided to author on 30 January, 2001.
- <sup>42</sup> Vincent J. Goulding, "From Chancellorsville to Kosovo, Forgetting the Art of War," *Parameters*, (Summer 2000), 7.
- <sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 8.
- <sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>45</sup> David J. Benjamin Jr., *Prerequisite for Victory: The Discovery of the Culminating point*, (Fort Leavenworth, Kansas: School of Advanced Military Studies, U.S. Army Command and General Staff College, 1986), 23.

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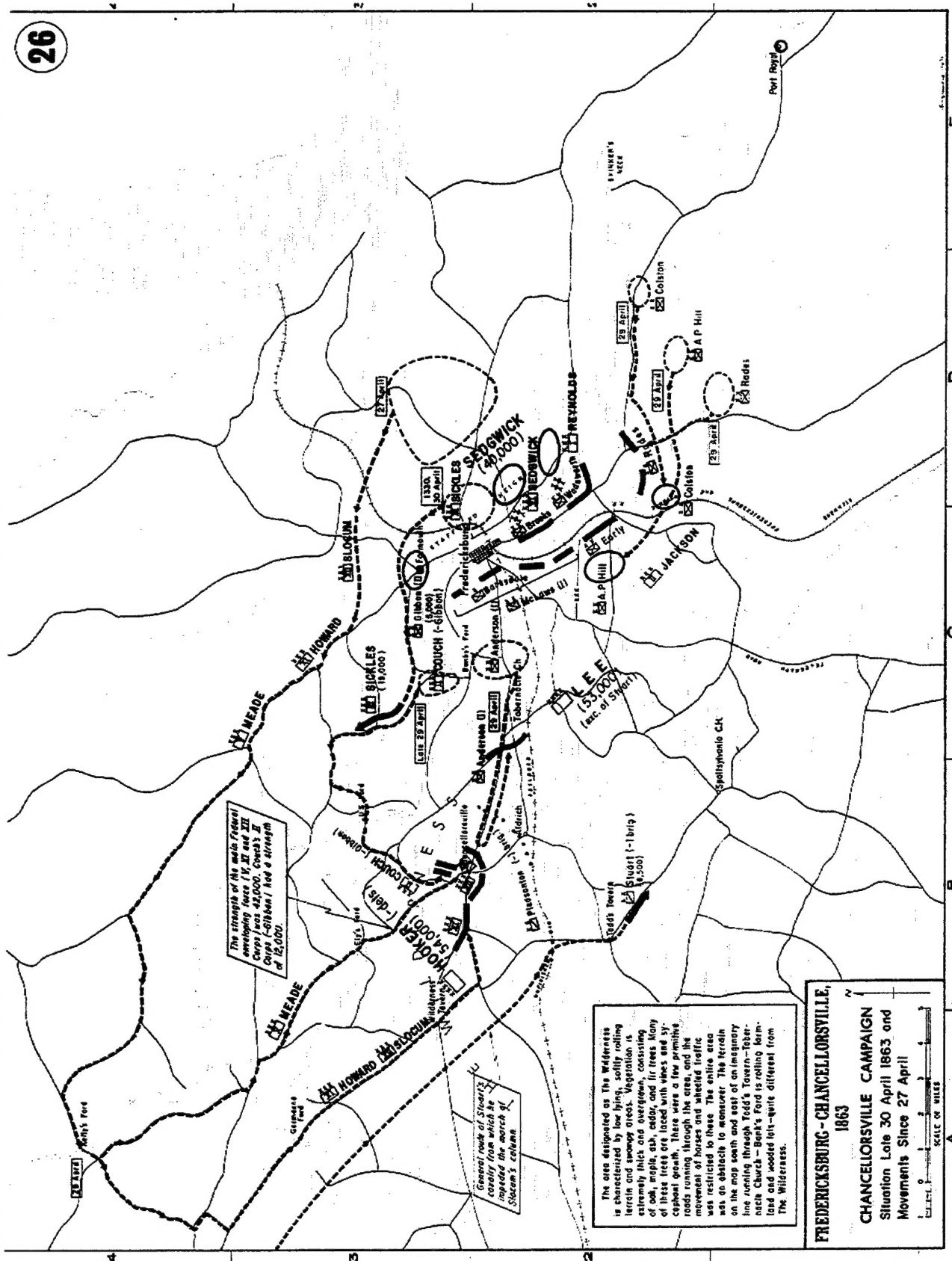
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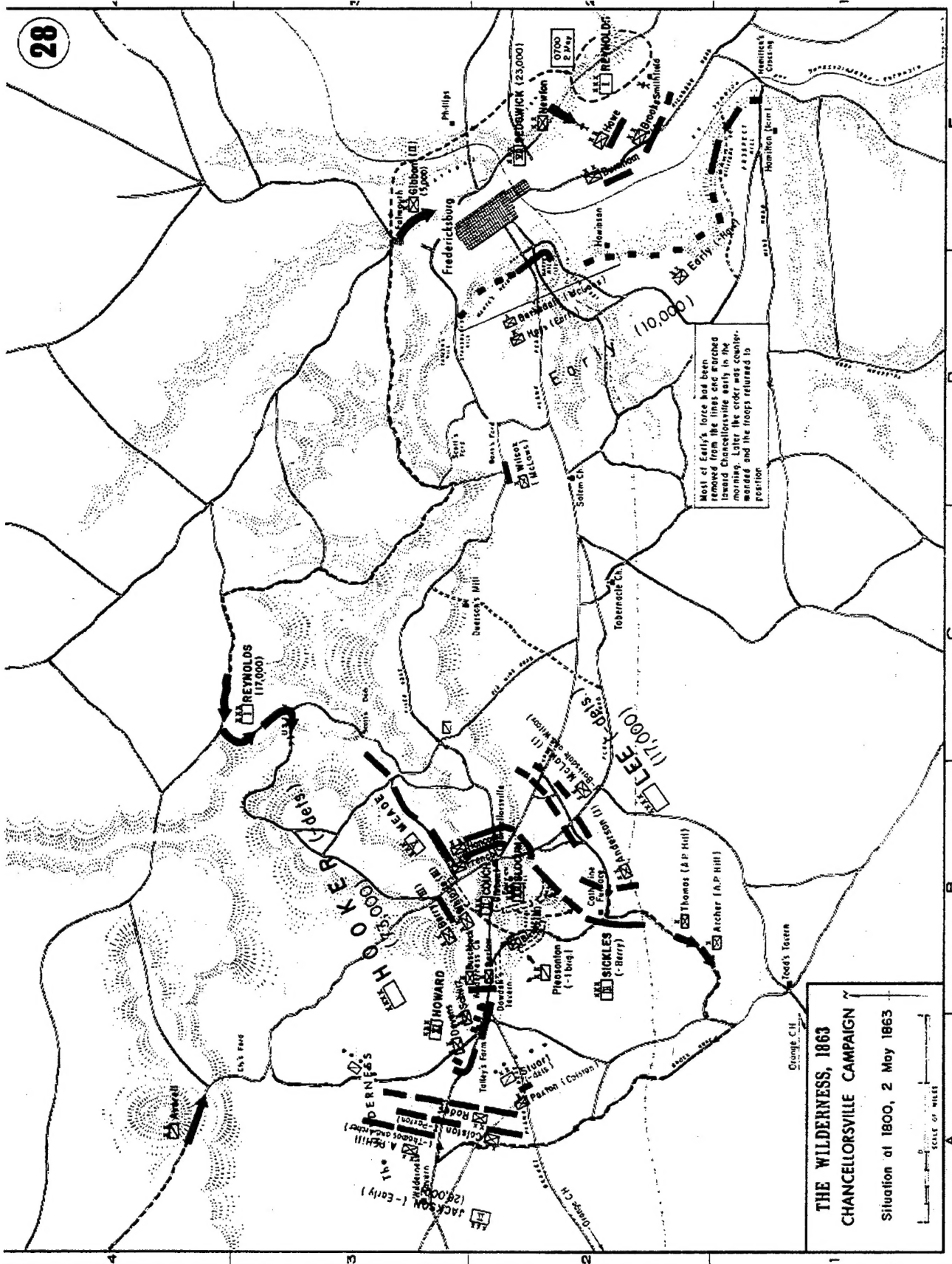
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MAP A



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